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**Book Review: Finn Larsen, The EU and Federalism: Politics and Policies  
Compared (Ashgate 2011)**

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# Book Review

***The EU and Federalism: Politics and Policies Compared***, edited by Finn Laursen.  
Surrey, England: Ashgate/Lund Humphries Publishing Company, 2011, 304 pp.,  
£65.00 hardback.

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Since its birth in the 1950s the study of the evolving political system that has come to be known as the European Union (EU) has been bedeviled by a persistent ontological question: namely, what type of political organization is the EU? During periods of existential crisis, such as the one in which the EU appears to find itself, the question tends to acquire a heightened resonance. How the question is answered has some rather profound implications for scholars studying the EU. First, it provides a frame of reference for how to empirically assess the EU and, second, it can provide normative clues as to where the Union may (or may not) be heading. It is against this broader backdrop, that aspects of this ontological challenge are taken up in this edited volume. Various forms of political organization are considered, *sui generis* ones, international organizations, and federal systems. The most prominent theoretical point of departure is the federal analogy, however. Such approaches to EU politics and policy are to be welcomed in a field that has for too long eschewed the explicit comparative route—especially that which involves direct comparisons with federal systems. To this end, the volume represents a contribution to the growing literature that seeks to shed light on the EU's institutional development through comparative assessment.

The book is structured around two core themes. The first addresses the question of what type of polity is the EU. Three chapters attempt to grapple with this issue from rather different angles. Having set the polity's institutional features on apparently firmer conceptual foundations, the book moves on to the second theme, the analysis of EU policy outputs. Most of the book's chapters, eight altogether, focus on a range of EU policies that includes the environment, health, employment, security, finance, and migration. Not all chapters necessarily adopt a comparative perspective, however. One transversal theme that frequently emerges and cuts across many of the chapters is the emergence of new modes of governance, such as the open method of coordination in the EU. Providing the reader with an introduction to federalist theory and some concluding remarks on the EU's post-Lisbon constitutional settlement are the two substantive contributions by the editor. As befits a book whose title juxtaposes the EU and federalism, the aim is to shed light on the EU's institutional development through comparative assessment. So, to what extent does this edited volume deliver on its comparative federalism promise? The short answer is a rather limited delivery insofar as comparative insights are concerned.

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The book kicks-off with the editor's introduction that tackles themes such as definitions of federalism, the U.S. federal bargain at Philadelphia, the theory underpinning *The Federalist Papers*, and the EU's pillar structure. There is nothing particularly new in this discussion and it appears to add little to the book's overall aim. The following three chapters confront the difficult issue of unraveling what kind of polity the EU is. The section begins with chapter by Wolinetz that offers a good methodological primer on the art of comparison and its relevance to the EU. Such comparisons can be conducted on a variety of levels, such as the direct comparison with existing states, with regional systems, and with international organizations, as well comparisons that have a longitudinal dimension. One important point made by the author—much overlooked by many analysts in the field—is that not only can the EU be profitably compared with other federal systems, but that in doing so lessons can also be derived by those federal systems from the EU. Chapter 3 then provides the core analysis of the EU polity from a comparative federalism perspective. There are some interesting insights in the chapter, for instance the fact that the EU “lacks the competence to generate its own competences”. The importance of this feature cannot be overstated and nor can its corollary—that any transfer of powers requires the unanimous agreement of the Member States. These and other features suggest to the author that the EU is not a federal state or a classic federation. Instead, her conclusion is that the EU is a *sui generis* federation. As an attempt to navigate the great dualism in EU studies, the comparative approach versus the *sui generis* approach, it is hard to not notice the oxymoronic element in the concept. Furthermore, it is not clear what the analytical leverage of the concept of a *sui generis* federation is and even more questionable whether it represents a new type of federation that will be emulated in the future, as the author claims. Nonetheless, the chapter does attempt to grapple with the ontological question of what type of political organization the EU is and in providing a plausible account explicitly draws on federalism. This is much less the case for the last chapter in the polity section. It is largely a critique of various theses articulated by Moravcsic and Majone and how these authors systematically understate the problems of democratic legitimacy in their conceptions of the EU as little more than a regulatory state. The critique is well known and thus the chapter adds little to the volume's central goal. More conspicuously, it is not rooted in any structured comparison with other systems. This is a shame for there is a growing literature regulatory federalism by scholars such as Kelemen that is explicitly comparative in addressing some of these issues.

In the second part the book shifts its analytical attention to EU policymaking. The focus is on styles of policymaking and the nature of the outputs produced. This constitutes the book's main empirical contribution and its broad scope, in terms of covering diverse policy fields, is both welcome and informative. But the quality and coherency of the chapters is rather mixed. Three chapters in particular are worth singling out since they are engaged in structured comparative analysis of the EU with other federal systems in the policy domains of the environment, employment, and health. The federal system in question is Canada and all three contributing authors provide novel insights across their respective policy domains. For readers interested in the EU and federalism as well as empirical case studies that go beyond the default comparison of the EU and the USA, these three chapters are well worth reading and are the most innovative in the book from a federalism perspective. As these chapters attest, there is evidently much analytical leverage to be had from comparing the EU and Canadian forms of federalism. It is unfortunate then that this comparative federalism route was not pursued more systematically across other policy fields. The remaining comparative chapters are a rather mixed bunch. Apart from a comparative chapter that seeks to draw insights on responses to the financial crisis mostly from Japan, the rest focus on

international organizations. The EU's water policy regime is compared to that of the emerging regional system of several African states that form the Southern African Development Community, EU security governance is compared with NATO and the USA, and the benchmarking exercises of the EU are compared with those of the OECD. Whilst all three reveal some interesting, though at times rather stretched, insights, it is the last of these chapters that excels in providing valuable lesson drawing for the EU. Through the focused comparison of EU and OECD benchmarking, Groenendijk identifies the various mismatches at the heart of the EU's policy design (including the open method coordination) and suggests some compelling policy proposals such as pursuing "enhanced benchmarking cooperation" across a more limited range of Member States. The last chapter in the empirical section deals with the EU's migration policy. It contains no comparison and does not mention federalism. Indeed, its main argument is to underscore the EU's uniqueness—ultimately a fair conclusion but one that sits rather oddly in a book dedicated to comparing the EU. Overall, though the book is well structured it lacks a degree of theoretical coherence across the chapters that ultimately results in a limited contribution from a comparative federalism perspective. This is largely because there are a number of chapters that have a stand-alone feel and do not engage in any structured comparative analysis. Nonetheless, there are some valuable contributions—especially the three EU/Canadian case studies and one on EU/OECD benchmarking—that are well written and certainly deliver on the book's federal and comparative promise.

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